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# A CRITIQUE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Leon Golub

CONTEMPORARY American and European painting has been increasingly identified as abstract expressionist in character. This dominance is apparent in exhibitions and critical literature, particularly in the reportorial journals, *Art Digest* and *Art News*, which attempt to document the art of our times. A major portion of critical space is devoted to the exponents of this development, celebrated as the logical and primary focus of the art of the immediate present.

The impact of these journals on younger artists is enormous, establishing trends and patterns of influence. This critique explores some metaphysical and formal suppositions of abstract expressionism as exemplified in the critical validation of this movement: (1) in regard to individual achievements (that is, the *capacity* for such achievements); (2) in relation to the general social arena. All subsequent quotations are from the November 15, 1953 *Art Digest*—Symposium: The Human Figure—and the December 1, 1953 *Art Digest* and the December, 1953 *Art News* which discuss the "Younger European Painters" exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum. The purpose and nature of this exhibition—trends among younger artists—points up the dominance of abstract expressionism in "advanced" circles and the documentation (and formulation) of this role in the critical response of these journals.

John Ferren (*Art Digest*, November 15, 1953) states that "Abstraction gave us the fresh plastic truths of our time. Abstract expressionism gave a new range to the sensibility involving the whole, 'existential' man. Its humanism is implicit not explicit." James Fitzsimmons (*Art Digest*, December 1, 1953): "Had I been around when the 'old masters' of our times were 'younger painters,' I doubt that I could have been more excited about their work and more optimistic about the future of art than I am today when I look at the work of Soulages, Mathieu and Riopelle. . . ."

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This optimism is manifested at a time when the multi-variant range of innovation that introduced and maintained the modern movement in art has apparently narrowed into a relatively fixed style-appearance (uniform content—or, uniform rejection of specific content) that is influential on artists in widely separate locales. Abstract expressionism is an international style, perhaps the most generalized and widespread style that has appeared in this century. To what extent this style approaches anonymity—and paradoxically, in an extremely individualistic era, the intrinsic denial of individuated imagery—must be clarified in regard to the social role of the contemporary artist and any personal transcendence of general form expectations.

The writer would summarize the nature of abstract expressionism as follows:

1. the elimination of specific subject matters and a preference for spontaneous, impulsive qualities of experience.
2. the unfettered brush—discursive, improvisatory techniques—motion, motion organization, and an activated surface.

The artist substitutes for any normative sequence of concepts or experiences an impulse energy dramatized as “instinctual” to a pre-conscious state of mind. Actuality (purpose) is attained by abbreviated means through the “direct” impact of non-referential sensation. “Contact” becomes the meaning. Scratched, scribbled lines or ambiguous forms gesture an ambiguous reality when the artist cannot cope with the contradictory stereotypes of the culture.

The artist seeks an action that is pre-logical, pre-cognitive, and a-moral. Reversion or regression to primitive means, common to the childhood of the race or of childhood itself, can only be a romantic device, as modern man—for all his willful (and perhaps necessary) regressive hopes—must consciously seek and articulate what was once primitively experienced. If this expression cannot be directly achieved and if the sophisticated artist does not reach a residual primacy, his forms only simulate pre-conscious activation. Motion organization is then frequently allusive of the mannerisms and rocaille decoration of the eighteenth century and of the more recent Art Nouveau.

There are few common verbal equivalents of any such discursive motion and as observer recognition is not constant (except on rather illustrative levels in regard to the artist's undetermined intent), descriptive comment tends to be hyperbolic. Especially peculiar to abstract expressionism is the terminological remoteness of the purposes attributed to it. The claims made for one painting could as easily typify works by other artists. James Fitzsimmons characterizes Mathieu's painting as a “vast black canvas on which white and scarlet tendrils coil and snap with extraordinary tension. This is the cosmic theater, the

universe, the unconscious, the dark night within and around us in which primordial forces are engaged in a life-giving, life-destroying struggle that can only be witnessed at a remove; in dreams, in the photographs of astronomers and physicists and most evocatively, in art." If a critic purports such an explanation, he might well "see" those qualities in a painting. And while that painting might seem to intentionally characterize some such experiences, it might, also, very likely picture none of them, as it is not referential in its reduced state to such meanings in any specific fashion.

As Alfred Russell (*Art Digest*, November 15, 1953) writes: "The limitations of the non-objective idiom are its vastness, its lack of measure, its all-inclusiveness. It tends to equate all possible knowledge—especially intuitions of extra-spatial, non-Euclidian metaphors; the language of sign and symbol; the unconscious, and the laws of chance." There are no uniform or iconographic means (or for that matter, any notation corresponding to any scientific interpretation) through which the supra-formal aspects of such paintings could be defined. The ambiguities of abstract expressionism force the viewer to locate the extrinsic focus—in that the observer reacts through an allusive, self-referential perception. The observer does perceive variously accelerated or structured linear configurations; the attributes of these relations are so abstract, however, as to be incommensurable—these then can hardly be couched in metaphysical terms (unless the very negation of communicable content can be metaphysically construed).

The avoidance of content is not uniquely the problem of the abstract expressionist but is inherited from the abstract ideologies of the first decades of this century. Neo-plastic or constructivist artists sought (or seek) pure form, a non-idiosyncratic and universal art transcending the discordant images of the time. The abstract expressionists also deny any representative disorder, but their avoidance of the constructivist ideality and the irrational aspect of their "expressionist" bias points up an incapacity to avert some skirmished identification within a crisis situation.

This view may be clarified through regard of those "crisis" artists who retain referential associations in their work, e.g., Giacometti, Dubuffet, Glasco. Robert Goldwater (*Art News*, December 1953) regarding the "Younger European Painters" exhibition states: "In its emphasis on abstraction the exhibition is surely representative of the most vital currents of European painting. . . . There are, of course, individual expressionists and objectively minded painters and sculptors of quality. But they remain individuals. (Giacometti—and how little realist he is!—who was supposed to be the new bell-wether, has only found a few pale imitators.)" A similar attitude

regarding Giacometti as an isolated figure in respect to general trends is voiced by Herta Wescher (*Art Digest*, December 1, 1953). Giacometti is quoted as saying, " 'I don't know how to do a head any more. . . . All I can make are these things.' . . . Giacometti today is a solitary figure in Paris, detached from movements, programs or manifestos. He has found no disciples, and his art shows no evidence of derivations in his period. He would be very unlikely to have followers since his art is a continuous, groping search. It is a search in the face of fundamental and apparently irreconcilable human and sculptural issues."

Giacometti's uniqueness (an isolated position and in respect to the unusual quality and meaning of his work) might very well pin-point many of the critical issues of contemporary art. The quality of *certainly* (of role) is different in modern times. The culture is rich and diverse, but the artist is aberrant. The artist is not sure of his material—what he is to portray—or his purpose in so doing. Content is introspective and the prime reality acknowledged by the artist is reality of self.

The crisis in its most significant visual aspect concerns the rendering of a contemporary world picture. Picasso reordered the image of the time; distortions (of previously achieved ideologies) became the monumental and definitive visual equivalents of contemporary experience. These changes in the first decade of the twentieth century effected as abstraction, distortion, or gigantism, seen through a primitivist bias, are characteristic of the devaluation of the individual in society and in art. The loss of naturalistic discrete descriptions which originally designated the substantive and recognizable attributes of particular individuals or things was equivalent to a cultural dehumanization of man. Subsequently the twentieth century's overt exploitation of mass phenomena has become for some artists an interest in the irrational as a justification and as a source for creative differentiation. Klee and the surrealists worked from similar points of contact but through more intimate fantasy evocations. Subsequently the issue was raised at this level between those artists who confronted the dilemma through an idiosyncratic but heroically intense introspection—various expressionist or surrealist attitudes—and their ideological opponents who abhorred what Gabo has termed the "cave mentality" and sought an engineered clarification of form that would transcend any involuntal deviance. The expressionist, in a sense, wallowed in the mire of an orgasmic harassment of self, while the constructivists sought to reconstruct the visual environment in terms of the de-personalized but mystic potentialities of the future.

The basic attitudes of abstract expressionism might almost be deduced from its name: expressionism refers as it originally did to violence, subliminal

contents—an explosion of self; abstraction indicates general form inquiries, an avoidance of representational imagery and a commitment of visual impulse that is more “classic” or distanced (from any direct introspective impulsion). In a way, abstract expressionism wants a very good thing indeed—the intensity of personal commitment without the specificity such a view ordinarily entails. Gesture! if only to make an anonymous “contact.”

The definition of a contemporary style depends on the artist's capacity to wrest coherent directives from the divergent choices available. The abstract expressionist theory of problematic psychic explorations is sufficiently generalized, provisional, and comprehensible to permit individuals to directly and immediately achieve a “style.” These very factors, however (and one need only note the vast international output of abstract expressionist painting), also foster a situation in which it is almost impossibly difficult for an artist to define unique values beyond the common determinants of the style. Any dervish principle—that the prime elemental resources within the psyche have intense pictorial equivalents (or can even be tapped)—is still to be demonstrated. The abstract expressionists deal with spontaneity and although there are many levels of spontaneity, it remains doubtful whether these bravura skirmishings can evoke universals (of the type quoted from Fitzsimmons earlier) or point up elemental or instinctual processes and reactions. The question becomes *farical*: what is the difference (and how can these differences be recorded) between a subliminal impulse, the cosmos, and a fanciful doodle?

The individualism of Renaissance art up through Picasso, Ernst, Miro, etc., has been discarded in abstract expressionism. This is one aspect of the experiential crises of the modern world. Only that rare artist who is iconoclastically remote survives with an intrinsic and personal art. If an art form becomes too “free-floating,” that is, disassociated from representative contents, it may lose identification and become somewhat anonymous. Such anonymous objects have been functional in some collective cultures (wherein anonymity was a general social phenomenon integrated in the ways and means of the culture), but are certainly not in evidence in the highly mobile, individualistic Western world—although the aggregates of power (social) and the mechanics of modern society certainly predispose towards anonymous responses.

In such a context, the withdrawal of particular (intrinsic) points of view would emphasize the dangers of anonymous or non-committal attitudes. Abstract expressionism is non-referential and diffuse; for all its practitioners' strenuous efforts, it is deficient in regard to any intense, ideational involvement of the artist. As was stated earlier—the quality of *certainly* is of such a nature today that the artist is “free-floating” in respect to the contradictory aspects of

the culture or in regard to any personal point of view, which can only be achieved through a stringent and introspective demarcation of role.

Thomas Hess (*Art News*, December 1953) discussing Ad Reinhardt in respect to strongly reactive commitments writes, "Reinhardt's answer, characteristically would be mild but devastating laughter. Who's so tortured? Who's a cultural power?" Although the paintings of which Mr. Hess speaks are not abstract expressionist, Reinhardt's work has been previously associated with this movement. Regardless of this, however, and although the remark is a passing one, in a perhaps ironic context, that it was deemed worthy of being recorded is indicative of the incapacity of many modern artists to wrest out any uniquely definitive point of view—let alone gird themselves as did Giacometti—for a "search in the face of fundamental and apparently irreconcilable human and sculptural issues."

## COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SPECTATOR AND ARTIST

*Minna Citron*

*"The Work of Art is the Central Term, the Liaison in a Transaction which takes place between the Artist and the Spectator."*—ROGER FRY

**I**DEALLY, when there is rapport between the spectator and the artist—when the spectator looks at a work of art which is expressed in an idiom familiar and congenial—the "transaction" between the artist and the spectator is direct and immediate, the communication between them is complete and satisfying. But sometimes, for any number of reasons, the transaction, the communication, is incomplete; questions arise and remain unanswered in the spectator's mind; he feels a need to have the work explained. It is fruitless and most unsatisfactory to substitute words for the work itself as a means of communication, or to approach intellectually what should be, and what fundamentally must be, a sensory or an emotional experience. But the demand for an explanation is understandable.

*Minna Citron, a painter and graphic artist, living in New York, frequently lectures on art. This paper is based on a lecture given recently in São Paulo, Brazil.*